THE EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES OF ABORIGINAL TEACHERS IN PROVINCIAL SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Educators have increasingly come to realize that Aboriginal teachers face a number of experiences that are additional to and differ from those of other classroom teachers. Regardless of their experience or their areas of specialization Aboriginal teachers are often asked to act as role models and to provide information and resources on their culture. Partners in education in Saskatchewan continue to search for ways to provide direct support to Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools. The opportunity for these teachers to speak, to question, and explore issues is an important part of this process. When teachers have the liberty to tell their stories they begin to have an impact on policy, professional and curriculum development, instructional practices, and teacher education and development. This research centered on individual teachers revealing how their experiences, circumstances, and significant events affect them. The major focus was to explore the experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools.

Literature Review

A study on the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal teachers in Saskatchewan schools conducted by McNinch (1994) focused on the teachers' experiences and opinions about what was happening with equity practices in Provincial schools. First Nations teachers cited a number of negative factors that hindered their recruitment and retention. These factors include: 1) resistance to recruitment practices and confusion of the goals of education equity, 2) a continued context of racial discrimination and prejudice, 3) First Nations teachers' discomfort with the formal process used to report racist acts they experienced, 4) a lack of First Nations administrators, 5) an us/them division between First Nations and non-First Nations staff, 6) a perception that these teachers are the experts in all First Nations culture, 7) a lack of

understanding and respect for the First Nations cultures and world view, and 8) a fear that they would be assimilated rather than integrated into the system. Despite the negative factors, First Nations teachers continue to apply for teaching positions in provincial schools.

McNinch (1994) also named several positive factors that support the successful recruitment and retention of Aboriginal teachers. Some of these factors include: 1) that education equity benefits all students, 2) that First Nations teachers provide positive role models for all students, 3) that First Nations cultural activities and understanding these cultures has increased, 4) that cross-cultural training is promoted and accepted as necessary, and 5) that First Nations teachers are happier in schools that have a collaborative approach to teaching and schooling. First Nations teachers need to work in schools that validate their cultural identity. Those teachers indicated that they felt they played an important role in promoting the philosophy and practices of First Nations people. This was important to these teachers because they felt that the needs of First Nations students were appropriately reflected and respected. They also felt that they helped the students stay in school by being supportive and understanding of the many difficulties First Nations students experience in provincial schools.

In 1994 The Saskatchewan Teachers Federation began to recognize that there were an increasing number of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools. They also recognized that these teachers face a number of concerns that directly relate to their culture. The Federation claims that Aboriginal teachers: *may be asked to advise or intervene in difficult incidents involving Aboriginal students or racial incidents, often without a context of supportive policy or procedure in the school division. They themselves may be the subject of racial abuse* (p.7). Some teachers feel isolated if they are the only Aboriginal teacher in the school. The Federation speaks to the

importance of addressing the specific needs of these teachers who often face stresses that are additional to those faced by others, and to creating support networks for Aboriginal teachers.

Research conducted in the area of Aboriginal education is particularly valuable when qualitative methods are used to collect data. It is important for educators listen to teachers' voices and to come to a better understanding of Aboriginal teachers through their experiences and perceptions. Through this kind of research, more relevant policies can be developed and implemented to assist in the retention of, and support for Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools.

Project Description and Research Objective

The main research objective was to identify the experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal teachers in the provincial school system. To help reveal the information we were seeking we selected the following general question to guide the process:

What are the experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools?

The guiding questions we used to stimulate the discussions with the teachers were:

1. What challenges and opportunities have you encountered as an Aboriginal teacher in provincial schools?

2. How have your experiences affected your attitude?

3. What are your teaching plans for the future?

We chose to use multiple interviews with Aboriginal teachers who work in provincial schools. The multiple interview approach ensured that the teachers' points of view were carefully explored and verified. The design of the interviews attempted to keep the questions open-ended to allow teachers to bring their own perspectives to the issues being discussed. We

also attempted to establish a relationship between the teachers and ourselves as equals involved in an ordinary conversation and to consider the context of the interview and the body language of the participants as well as what was said in the interviews.

Dewey (1933) suggested that teachers need opportunities to reflect on their teaching and experiences in schools. They need to be put into situations that motivate them to increase their understanding of themselves as teachers by having them: ... *deliberate on their actions with open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and intellectual responsibility . . . Reflection enables us to know what we are about when we act* (p. 17).

Clark and Peterson (1986) reviewed research done on teachers' thinking and claim that results show . . . *that thinking plays an important part in teaching . . . the image of a teacher as a reflective professional is not far fetched* (p. 177).

Methodology

Qualitative research in the form of phenomenological inquiry was used to address the general and guiding questions in this study. Phenomenology allows researchers and participants to understand the meaning of what life's experiences are like by encouraging explanation and reflection in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what is happening. The phenomenological perspectives of Ricoeur (1976) and Van Manen (1990) were used to establish the research methodology for this study. Both theorists suggest that humans acquire understanding from a personal viewpoint. We used Ricoeur's *approaches to understanding* to gain entry into the conceptual world of the participants. This occurred in the following ways:

1) We accumulated data by interviewing most participants five times each. These tape-recorded multiple interviews focused on the general and guiding questions.

2) We distanced ourselves from the discourse situation by having the interviews transcribed into written language. This helped us interpret the data by reflecting what was said during the interviews, to analyze the text and to bring other points of view to help us understand what was said. The text was compared to relevant literature.

3) Interpretation occurred on a continuing basis throughout the duration of the study. During the interviews the participants were asked probing questions to insure an accurate and comprehensive description of what they were thinking.

All data collection adhered to the guidelines established by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Regina.

The Research Team

The research team was designed to bring together a cross-cultural perspective. **Lorri Melnechenko** grew up in a Metis community. She is a graduate of the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), and holds a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Regina. She has taught for ten years, eight of which have been in a community school. **Helen Horsman** has been a classroom teacher, a University professor, a Superintendent, and a Director of Education. She holds a Doctor Of Philosophy degree from the University of Saskatchewan. She has extensive experience in the field of Aboriginal Education and has taught in all the Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs in Saskatchewan.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by searching and arranging the interview transcripts into units of meaning by using the process of isolating thematic statements suggested by Van Manen (1990).

Ricoeur's (1976) process of understanding, explanation, and comprehension were used to supplement Van Manen's approach to isolating themes.

The *shared meaning-making* approach to inquiry allowed us to effectively grasp what we call the *teachers' voices*. The teachers were given the opportunity to interact and talk in an informal, nonthreatening environment. This approach also provided enough depth and detail to *take the reader into the setting*.

To insure that the methodology of this study produced reliable and valuable results we used Mishler's (1991) concept of trustworthiness to make meaningful interpretations and explanations. Guba (1981) maintains that for a study to be trustworthy and therefore reliable and valid it must be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Aspects of this study that contributed to its validity and reliability are:

1) prolonged engagement - data collection took place over a four-month period,

2) member checks - participants were given the opportunity to read copies of the transcripts throughout the data collection process.

3) peer debriefing - because credibility can be endangered by the bias of one of the researchers. Both members of the research team read and discussed the transcripts in order to ensure a *thick description* which provides an accurate picture of the context of the study.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

This section presents the data that were formulated with the teachers during the interviews. This material was generated over approximately a three-month period from April to June 1997. It also introduces the participants in the study.

Raw data was edited by omitting such words as "uh" and "you know." This editing helps provide for ease of reading while nor skewing the data.

The analysis of data is presented within the parameters of the theme identified below. This theme was generated from the transcripts of the informal interviews. Because the objective of the research was to collect data from Aboriginal teachers about their experiences and attitudes around working in provincial schools that was the major theme that emerged. There were also several sub-themes that emerged. These sub-themes were similar for most teachers therefore the analysis and interpretation of data obtained from all teachers are presented together. However, this study was not intended to be comparative so comparisons between what the teachers said are not made.

The main theme that emerged during the data analysis was: **The experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools**: The sub-themes that emerged from the main theme can be described as follows:

8. **Factors that Led to Teacher Training and Support at University**
9. **Challenges**
10. **Positive Experiences**
11. **Parents and Community**
12. **Staff Dynamics**
13. **Impact on Students**
14. **How Participants Viewed Themselves as Aboriginal Teachers**

The intent of this study was to let the teachers' voices tell the story. From this perspective the quotes from these teachers permeate the presentation of the data.

Participants

The participants in this study were seven teachers from rural and urban schools in southern Saskatchewan.

Experiences and Attitudes of Aboriginal Teachers in Provincial Schools

Factors That Led to Teacher Training and Support at University

The teachers in this study had life stories that needed to be told. Their stories are in fact the essence of the types of teachers they have become. Many of these teachers wanted "something better" but few really believed they could succeed at University or overcome a number of other barriers. They talked about how they didn't believe they had the abilities, the talents, or the intelligence to succeed, and that initially University was not within their realm. They also shared stories about the impact their families had on their decision making. Some teachers questioned their culture identity, did not see it as relevant, and at times even denied it. It seems that once these initial barriers were overcome and the decision was made to enter teacher education the support systems that existed for Aboriginal university students within the context of Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) enabled these participants to not only envision their own education but also to envision themselves as the bridge to Aboriginal Education in general.

Carl talked about wanting "something better":

> *I was working weekends bouncing in a bar and bartending. I was working construction all week, there it was, the middle of February, 40 below. I said, "there's more to life than this." There was no way I could go to university, I was 28 years old, I had three little kids. There was nothing for me; I was in a dead end job, underemployed. I knew it, everybody knew it, there was nothing.*

Lou described how the experiences of her parents influenced her pathway:

I didn't go to the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC). I went to regular University because I didn't want to take a native language. Dad always told us "Cree's not going to get you anywhere," so he made sure that Mom didn't teach us Cree.

She went on to explain:

I got a Bachelor of Arts in Indian Studies and you know my dad didn't look at it as an accomplishment; he said, "when are you going to be able to teach" and I said, "well I guess I'll have to go finish," so I did. That's when there was a different kind of praise.

The basis of Jim's support system was, and continues to be his family:

We come from a fairly traditional family so we were always taught that we should cooperate and share. We were taught that we should help each other and when people ask me well why do you do what you do, I always just say well it's our family values. Support still comes from my family today. Whenever I'm really stressed out, it's always over bad or prejudiced attitudes, systematic barriers, and racism. It's always my family that I go back to for support.

Carl related the impact of his mother's commitment to education:

My mom died when I was twelve. My Mom firmly believed in education. She had grade eight and for a Métis woman to get her grade eight back in the 20s and 30s was pretty big deal. She thought education was the secret and pushed us. My older brother graduated from high school and went on to university to be an engineer.

Some teachers struggled with the decision to enter teacher education and believed they were not capable of completing the academic requirements to become a teacher. Carl said:

So I went back to school and I figured I was stupid. I said I've got to work real hard and if I work real hard maybe they won't figure I'm stupid and they won't throw me out - So I worked very hard for the first semester and I got a scholarship for academic proficiency.

He then described his decision to enter teacher education as a fight against the odds.

When SUNTEP came along it gave me an opportunity to go to school with a bursary. You're fighting the odds, you're doing something that is very difficult, it's like going to war, because you're changing everything you've done in many ways. So many people who have gone through that education process; it's cost them their marriages, it's cost them their families, it's cost them their friendships, it's cost them so much because they've had to change, go from <u>their</u> life to a professional life.

Dolores acknowledged that originally she questioned the validity of teacher education programs designed for Aboriginal students:

> *To be honest, I sort of thought of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) as being watered down. It was just something in me. Then I was talking to my sister, who's been teaching in the provincial school system for the past 15 years and had attended an SIFC program. My sister convinced me that SIFC was okay and that a support system was there.*

The vision becomes evident once the individuals actualized their potential both culturally and academically. Jim affirms this by saying:

> *There's no doubt in my mind that during those four years I was empowered. I had a cultural identity when I started but it was really reinforced during those four years.*

Ann adds:

> *When I completed SUNTEP, I was asked to substitute for a professor at the University of Regina. This was a class in teaching teachers how to teach reading. So, you know, for her to have that confidence in me was wonderful.*

Carl verifies what the other teachers attested to:

> *We had good people helping us. They inspired us, told us we were good, and they provided opportunities for us to become better. It's been more than 10 years and I still feel that I owe that place something; I still feel it's given me lots. The standards aren't university standards; they're something else; they're standards that we ourselves set as a native community and as a program.*

The struggles, conflict, and successes these teachers encountered are significant. The encouragement and support they received from their teacher education programs and their families helped them cross cultural borders that most other people did not realize existed. It also enabled them to cope with, and in some instances break down the barriers that would have in many instances prevented them from succeeding.

Challenges

Aboriginal teachers encounter a number of situations and experiences that make their positions within provincial school systems challenging and frustrating. The teachers in this study shared a number of experiences that brought these challenges and frustrations to life. For example, Lou's initial experience was a four-month teaching position:

> *I didn't get along with a co-worker. She was nonnative assistant and I was hired as a classroom teacher. She was older than I was and thought she had to take charge of everything and we just didn't get along. One day she was telling me something about her son who had a student loan. She said to me - your degree probably didn't mean as much because you didn't pay for it. I was angered and challenged her. I got reprimanded and sent to anger management classes.*

Her next experience unfolds this way:

> *I remember when the principal came, we were supposed to have a staff meeting. I came in early and he didn't even ask who I was. He said, "Oh, and whose teachers' assistant are you?" I looked at him and said, "Sorry I'm not a teacher assistant."*

Further into her career Lou was asked to represent her school on a division-wide committee.

> *There was a committee set up for goals for a successful year. There was a meeting four times a year at the Board Office and I'd been asked to attend. I found out later why I was put on this committee. I overheard somebody saying that they wanted somebody brown on the committee.*

Feelings of alienation result when primitive perceptions of Aboriginal people prevail.

> *For interviews I've had some people come to the door and say, "I'm looking for the classroom teacher"; I said "well it's me."*
>
> *I don't think I really look at myself as a First Nations person; I think of myself as a teacher. Once in awhile you get one of the nonnative teachers asking "do you think we should do this" or "how should I do this?" and I said, "Well they're just kids. they're just people, if you're going to the house you still have to knock on the door.*
>
> *When somebody asks me how many Indian kids there are in my room I say I don't even look at them that way. I only have one nonnative kid and they say, well is she smart? And I said, Why is she supposed to be? On the family swim day somebody said, oh you have*

to watch those Aboriginal kids, they get into everything. Like really when you go out it's our kids that seem to be singled out a lot.

Ann explained her experience as she interviewed for a new teaching position:

I was told there were 121 applications received for this Grade 5/6 teaching position and then it turned into a principalship. The School Board wanted to hire an Indian person but when they did the town people started pulling their kids out and moving them to another elementary school in a neighboring town.

Dolores recalls her first job offer:

I got a temporary contract as a Cree teacher and I stressed to them that I'm not a Cree teacher, I'm a Cree person but you know, they pretty much stressed well you are a teacher and you do know Cree.

Resulting from this hiring practice Dolores confirms that:

This is my second year of being 60% in the classroom and 40% with Cree. It's tough because I feel stretched and pulled. It's my classroom I feel ultimate responsibility for. I would like to do either the Cree or preferably have my own classroom.

She elaborates on hiring practices:

I have voiced this several times at meetings here in the school system. When you are a native teacher getting hired the question is - which community school? One teacher said this is the attitude of the most teachers.

Eve recounts her experiences with racism and alienation:

I remember one particular time when a parent removed her child from my classroom. I think that was the first time I ever felt my nativeness, like I was different. Also, at that school I started to feel I wasn't going anywhere because no one was calling on me to do anything; I was just sort of there.

In the next school she taught she recalls:

I remember not wanting to go to school in the morning and yet I loved my job. I loved teaching. I just hated to get up in the morning to go to that school because I felt so much hostility. Even the principal was harassing me. I felt like what I was doing was wrong yet I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong.

Lou explained how one parent's decision affected her:

I had one nonnative kid in my room last year. His Mom moved him at Christmas time because at the concert she saw that he was the only nonnative kid in my room.

Many Aboriginal teachers encountered conflicting and frictional challenges as they began their careers in provincial schools. These experiences carried overtones of racism, stereotyping, prejudices, and general misunderstanding of different cultures. The most prevalent bearers of these attitudes were the adults these teachers dealt with in the school and the community. Regardless of the dissension, these teachers have overcome the struggles. Their persistence has influenced and been pivotal to the changing atmosphere in Saskatchewan schools.

Positive Experiences

Although Aboriginal teachers face many challenges in provincial schools, they also have numerous positive encounters. These constructive experiences, particularly the ones they have with students, remind them of their commitment to students and to education in general. Dolores put it this way:

I have first Nations students who are really quite pleased when I mention that I'm First Nations. I speak highly about my culture and you can tell that they're as proud as can be. Rather than holding back they want to share.

Lou provided the following:

I think one of the positives is being outside at recess. You get to know all the kids and see them in a different light. I tell them they're special because I'm with them all day. Some of the kids on the playground are kids I taught in grade three. When I see these kids they treat me with a little more respect.

Eve explained how she needed to prove herself and how she went about doing that:

I don't think they'd ever seen a native teacher in that neighborhood. The community was treating me a little different. They would bypass my classroom and put their kids into another classroom. I would feel it had to do with me being native. Now it's totally different cause I've proven in their eyes that I'm a capable teacher. Since then I've had a lot of parents tell me they're really glad that I'm teaching grade four so that I could teach

native studies and that they like to see all this native stuff. The harder I worked, the more involved I became at the school, the more people notice that in the community they work really well together so the parents see my program, they see what I do. The last four years at this school have been really good for me.

Eve shared how encouragement from administration and positive feedback from parents affected her:

The principal encouraged me to become involved. For example, I coordinated an art show in the gym and parents came to view the children's art. Because of the way I set it up they really complimented me a lot. That gave me a lot of confidence. The fact the principal had enough faith that I could pull off something like that, was good too.

Eve's feelings of inclusiveness resulted in confidence building:

It was exciting at this new school because there were other native teachers. Also, I was required to do things at the school. I was now becoming part of the school system, part of the school community and I was no longer in the background.

Carl has seen an increase in student involvement since Aboriginal students have started to "buy into" their school:

We've got Aboriginal kids involved in drama, we've got them involved in choir, we've got them involved in everything, and the parents are involved in our schools. It's their school and I think it took a long time for them to realize this is not the white school.

Dolores told about the support she received from parents:

Eight different children had their parents here so to me that's pretty positive. And then the food they were bringing, nobody asked them to bring food.

Even with my more difficult students who are so unmotivated. I have positive relationships with the parents. I'm working with Mom and Dad; we're working together to get the students motivated and moving.

It is clear that Aboriginal teachers experience numerous satisfying opportunities as they continue their careers in Provincial schools. They are viewed as role models by both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students and parents. They work together with parents as partners to meet

students' special needs. They watch Aboriginal students grow in extra curricular activities and in some cases see a significant improvement in student attendance. They are commended for the cross cultural awareness and experiences they bring to their schools.

Parents and Community

Over a decade ago when larger numbers of Aboriginal teachers entered provincial classrooms the manner in which they were perceived by parents and community varied and was unpredictable. To some extent these perceptions have diminished. Others still prevail.

Ann recalls:

> *I met this lady walking on the street and she says you're sure lucky you got hired with no teaching experience or background. That's when I stopped her and said, "excuse me but I have about 15 years in education." If I was a male would any of these things happen? Would a woman stop him on the street and say that?*

Lou shared her beliefs around the reaction of Aboriginal people in her school community:

> *Native people, if I see them in school they're different than when I see them in out in community. Here they don't talk as much. I don't know why. When I see them in the school or out on the street I notice things. It's like a wall comes up or they don't talk as much. Sometimes they don't even talk to you.*

Rob talked about the prodical that is sometimes used when parents have concerns:

> *Some parents come to the school because they don't agree with what is being taught or how it's being taught. I wouldn't have had a problem with that if they'd come to me, but when they go to the administrator and then the administrator comes to me, I just didn't have fun anymore.*

Carl addressed the issue of becoming a new in school administrator in a school:

> *I know I was in the fishbowl in the town the first year here cause I was an aboriginal teacher, O God, they got an aboriginal administrator at the school, what the heck's the school come to? Then the reserve community said, My God, they hired a goddamn Métis; why didn't they hire a Treaty Indian? They resent me as much as the non-Indian community and the Metis community are secretly proud.*

I wore that label for a year - you only got the job there as a vice-principal because you have a brown face, Its probably true, it helped me, but I'll tell you having a brown face hasn't helped me keep it. Working my butt off and working hard is how I keep this job and in fact I'm very proud of what I do. I put in long hours and I don't do it because I have to, I do it because I want to.

He went on to talk about other hiring practices:

When we hired another teacher there were five people who applied. Three were dead equal and one of those was aboriginal. It was at that point that I said, affirmative action and education equity, It's a no brainer! That's when it's effective, that's when it works. I don't want the people in the community saying " you got the job because of the brown face."

Jim spoke about the impact of his presence in the school during his first year:

In my first year a lot of aboriginal parents came for parent-teacher interviews. One lady suggested that I phone a gentlemen and ask him to come in because he was a chief Another woman and her husband were there, the woman looked me straight in the eye and she said to me, Clinton talks about being a lawyer, he's never talked like that before. At parent teacher interviews - a lot of parents will come and talk to me even if I don't teach their kids.

Ann expressed her frustrations of working with her "own people":

If I thought I was going to be tacked to the wall this many times in one week by the local board chairperson and the community liaison worker I wouldn't have taken this job. I took it because one of the things you always want to do is to go back and help the people. The reserve didn't have their own school; this was the closest I could come to it. So much for helping your own people.

When it got right down to it they were more concerned about what other people thought of them, they were concerned of how they would look to the public. I said we were never like that and we're still not. I thought what about the children.

Some teachers considered returning to their home communities to teach. They shared their reservations. When Lou was asked whether she ever thought about going to a Band School to teach she said:

Yeah, but then again, damn politics. I've heard so many different stories I don't know if

I would like to. I wouldn't mind going where the band is not the sole hiring and firing thing. I wish it was more like the provincial, with the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation. At least you have stability.

Then again it reminds me of what my Dad said - "why do you want to go back there? There's nothing there." Either your Dad has to be chief or counselor or something in order to get in; that was his reason and he said they're not going to help you, you have to help yourself.

Eve concurred with Lou:

I think band schools have a label of being very insecure and it would be kind of scary leaving something quite secure. Like when my brother said, "are you crazy, you know, you have a permanent full-time contract."

The relationships that parents and teachers build are critical to student success at school. The manner in which the larger school community perceives a teacher can determine whether or not the teacher will be effective and in fact successful. The teachers in this study often contended with apprehension and uneasiness from parents and community. Most teachers found that once they proved themselves that they were valued for the diversity and talents they brought to the school.

Staff Dynamics

Each year more Aboriginal teachers become staff members in provincial schools. Over the past several years many school divisions in Saskatchewan have initiated affirmative action programs. Contrary to their intention, these practices have sometimes had an adverse effect on collegial relationships as Aboriginal teachers joined provincial staffs. The adoption and misinterpretation of affirmative action programs has tended to nurture a less than inviting climate for new aboriginal teachers. In most cases these teachers were and are the first and only Aboriginals on staff. This section is a reflection of the relationships built on past and current

responses and interactions these teachers had with their colleagues. The teachers we interviewed were on staff in several different kinds of schools. Some taught in suburban elementary and high schools while other were from rural or community schools. Regardless of the geographic location their stories had similar themes.

Jim divulged his feeling about being an Aboriginal teacher on a staff:

> *It causes them to watch what they say when I'm around and it keeps them on their toes. I give the impression that I'm not intimidated by anybody and sometimes that's a blessing, sometimes that's a curse; people will watch what they say and conduct themselves quite nicely around me or else they're too intimidated to approach me for help.*

However, Jim felt he had an ally:

> *Gerry was always the person I could go to. He was our vice principal and that was the guy who I kind of bonded with at the administrative level.*

After several months in her new school Eve also felt supported by administration:

> *At Christmas time I was at that school and the principal came up to me and said: "I got to tell you this; you're doing an excellent job; the kids are wonderful, they're starting to behave well." I had a really rowdy class and they were really calmed down and you noticed a big difference in the kids and he was complementing on the difference that I'd made there and he gave me this big hug and he said, "You're doing a good job."*

When Carl began his job as vice principal, staff response varied:

> *Some of them outright resented me because I was aboriginal, some of them resented me because I was younger than them or that I wasn't qualified for the job. Some of them were open-minded and they realize that my presence here and the things I've done have made their jobs easier. They're glad there's no fist fighting anymore in the hallways, they're glad there's not all of this turbulence that was here before. The kids are at school and not skipping out.*

Ann spoke from her experience as a female administrator:

> *I've had to learn that it's just a sense of getting them be involved, to make them feel as though they're making the decisions, or contributing. But I'm not the type of person who goes into a staff room and opens up my life. I think it's a female thing. They thought I should have been sharing and talking about things personally. They felt that I*

wasn't showing a concerned side. I honestly felt that some problems might have been different had I been male or nonnative. But it makes you more determined to tackle things head on.

One of Jim's early conversations with school division administration served as a reality check:

I was telling him about the prejudiced attitudes and racism. He looked me straight in the eye and said, what did you expect? I just thought to myself, you're right, thanks. You want to go for coffee?

The following describes Eve's experience with an in-school administrator:

He would just peek into my door and watch to see what I was doing or he'd have the intercom on and he'd pick up what I was teaching. I became determined when I found out he was really trying to intimidate me. I decided "no I don't let people do that to me; I will go and speak to him." It was then that he took out this little scribbler he had with my name in it and he said, "here's three things that I'd like you to work on." I felt that he thought that I wasn't good enough and so I think he was just trying to find things on me so he could ask me to leave the school. All he could find were picky things so after I approached him he never bothered me again.

When Aboriginal teachers enter provincial schools the expectation has been that they would be able to consult with others teacher on staff about Aboriginal education. Lou said:

The other teachers wonder what do you do with Aboriginal kids. I said, They're kids, you just have to listen to them and be ready when they're willing to talk or notice their body language.

She went on to say:

Well if I don't know something I just tell them straight, "Don't expect me to know everything and maybe it's best if you go find out."

Jim took a different position:

I gratefully accepted that role. Native Studies was a skeleton program when I got there; now it's the strongest program in the city. Our enrolment skyrocketed after I got there. I'm one of four people in the province accredited in Native Studies. People are sometimes intimidated and I have a hard time getting them to feel comfortable so I can help them.

Rob felt the pressure of a classroom teacher acting as a consultant:

When teachers asked for help my wife and I finally took a stand. We told them, we have two consultants on payroll downtown, that's who you should consult with. I'm Metis, I'm not First Nations so I'm not going to say that I know everything there is to know about First Nations people. I'd rather some other person talked about it than me giving some sort of false information.

Initially, for most teachers, the dynamics of staff relationships were tenuous. However over time their presence and persistence began to establish a more positive relationship and understanding. Aboriginal teachers have become leaders on their staffs. They have initiated cross cultural awareness and changed the attitudes and perceptions of many other teachers.

Impact on Students

Educators have come to know that teachers' interpersonal skills and the relationships they are able to establish with their students are critical to creating and maintaining a positive school environment. The teachers in this study talked extensively about the significance of creating relationships with students. They shared their ideas about how they viewed their students and the impact they had on them. Carl said:

The kids we have here are no different than any other kids. You have to give them half a chance; what they need is a little bit of support. They're like flowers; give them a little water and they're going to grow and they're going to flourish. There's a lot of kids that I'm very proud of and they're proud of me.

I like teaching because of the things I bring to it. I bring a lot of energy, I bring a lot of humor. I tease the kids a lot, they tease me, I wrestle with them, they wrestle with me, I shoot baskets with them, I torment them, I tease with them, I joke with them, but they also know that there's lines. When they mess up and cross the line I have to do my job. If they mess up and they pay the price and it's over, it's time to get on with life.

We've got kids, aboriginal kids involved in drama, we've got them involved in choir, we've got them involved in everything, and the parents are involved in our schools. It's their school and I think it took a long time for them to realize this is not the white school.

School teachers have a tendency to sit at a lot of people's tables of honor. You have that opportunity to sit there so just think about that when you're dealing with kids. I really have taken that to heart. I would like to have a lot of kids say in school, that teacher was big plus for me, that he really made a difference. I don't care if they ever thank me for it but I want them to at least know that I've tried.

At SUNTEP, they created a nest. It was like four years of safety in that classroom. The beauty of your own classroom is that you can create a little nest where it's safe. I try to create a nest or at least to let the kids know that there's some feathers around here that they can pull into their nest if they need to.

I have expectations of my students. I believe that nobody here is a real bonehead. They have to work hard but also I'm willing to do it over a long period of time, like I don't expect to, the frogs to turn into princes in one day.

My first year as vice-principal here was like jumping into a fire. Somebody asked me what my job was like, I said, "It's like being the gatekeeper in Beirut" - now it's a good place, I love it here. It's just the best place in the world. I've been offered several different places, I've been offered three principalships, I turned them all down, my reason is "who's going to look after my babies?" cause these are my babies.

I took the dropout rate very serious and my goal was to try to keep every kid possible in school. We tracked it; our dropout rate was 7% in our second year. It was because we hunted those kids down, we dragged them to school, we phoned them at home, we talked to their parents, we did whatever we could.

You give respect, you get respect. I have high standards and I expect them to work. My job is for them to learn, to teach awareness, to help them understand. My job is not to control them. I tease them and I love them and I hug them and I do whatever I have to do and Friday I'm so sick of them, I want to get rid of them.

That the more you get involved in their lives the more they believe in you. You can only do so much though. They don't have to walk the halls in fear and the nonnative kids also don't have to walk the halls in fear of the reserve kids.

They know I'm not afraid to deal with racism issues. If those things are thrown about, I deal with them. I don't want to hide them under the carpet. so I think they see me as fair; and what I sort of hear a lot of is I give this place balance.

Eve spoke about her love for children and how she viewed herself as a role model:

Well I work with a few Aboriginal students and I think I act as a role model and a kind of teacher I am I think that would be something that kids would take away with them, yeah. But I love all kinds of kids; it doesn't really matter what color their skin is.

Jim was able to identify a number of factors that made him realize that he was having a beneficial effect on the students in his school:

It's hard to explain because you see it in their faces. It's not something that you see on a piece of paper, it's what you see in their faces; it's a good feeling and they feel good for it; they see somebody, they hear somebody that's talking kind of like them, and knows about, and is like them. The first Native Studies class that I taught had mostly aboriginal kids and you could tell they felt good. The word got around quick and I noticed the positive impact, positive feeling, around that school all of a sudden and they even came around the staff room door a couple of times. I bet before that an aboriginal student never went up to the staff room door.

He continued:

People ask - what's your secret? I don't have one. Treat the kids like they're human beings and they respond to that. It's the relationship that's important. They're not going to respond to a negative relationship.

Eve talked about building self esteem and the long term impact that has on students:

I always tell the parents that's the first think I work on my classroom is the children's self-esteem because I believe that if you don't have self-esteem learning is almost impossible.

Every year the kids come back to visit and they stop in classroom for their hugs and they give me hugs back and they write me little notes. I have grade nine students coming back to visit and I see kids on the street that are older now still remember things that happened in our classroom.

Ann expressed her concern about the students ability to retain their self esteem and self confidence as they move away from the basis their Aboriginal teachers have provided:

The sad part is what's going to happen to the children who we worked so hard to build up their self-confidence and self-esteem. I hope we've done the job good enough so that when they become the minority once again that they're strong enough.

The impact teachers have on their students is difficult to measure. However, it is something that teachers have an innate ability to sense. These teachers knew that they had influenced their students in a worthwhile manner. They have done this by showing students what respect looks like. They have been able to walk in their shoes, listen to their voices, and watch their body language. They have empowered students by setting high expectations and working with them to achieve them.

How Participants Viewed Themselves as Aboriginal Teachers

Emerging from the data were stories that brought to life the perspectives of how these teachers viewed themselves as Aboriginal teachers. Despite the challenges and barriers, Aboriginal teachers continue to define themselves. Self determination for themselves, their students, and their communities has led to a stable and focused approach to education. The following stories acquaint introduce you to some of the forerunners of Aboriginal teachers in Saskatchewan.

Jim reflects on who he is as a teacher:

> *My purpose in life is to educate. I strongly believe that I've found my niche. I have peace of mind and I'm happy about the choices I've made. I've never been as successful as I am now. I'll tell you I'd didn't start learning until I started teaching it.*
>
> *I base my whole philosophy on a reflection of my own performance and my own delivery. What I am doing in my role modeling.*
>
> *My education is spiritual, it's emotional, it's mental and it's physical - four parts. I'm in balance now and my teaching is balanced. I try to teach my students a holistic perspective and I try to help them get balanced.*
>
> *The road I've taken in our system is the spiritual route to show people how we are interconnected and to show people the cultural universal that we share. You have to see past the differences and you celebrate the similarities; that's what learning, and education and growing is all about.*

Sometimes I talk about racism but I don't really complain because I don't believe in myself as a victim. That's what happens to a person if they're going to be bent on racism and prejudice; it'll kill you that stuff. You'll be a victim all your life.

The people that stereotype are dying hard and fast. They are dropping like flies out of here but that's what I was there for, to kill stereotypes. I was going to die doing it, I didn't care.

I do morning prayer on a regular basis and some times my prayers have gotten a little political but they came from my heart. To be able to do that in one of our institutions shows that times are changing for the better. For me to not be reprimanded for doing it, reinforces that they hired me to provide them with a different perspective and that's what I did.

I gave a speech to the entire student body and staff on the elimination of racism. It stressed our moral obligation to relationships through our spirituality. That added a traditional perspective to it. I certainly made my impact there.

Carl describes himself this way:

I never feel that I'm as smart as people think I am. I anguish over so many things and I try hard and I'll never give up. I can't quit on my kids and I can't quit on what I do. I was trained to be an educator, a person, a learner, a contributor in the aboriginal community. Aboriginal people are in turmoil and in a lot of pain. With all of this pain that you have your school on any given day, why would you want to add to it. If there's any way I can diminish it that's my goal.

I don't believe that my job here is to <u>save</u> the system. My job is to <u>change</u> the system and I have no intentions of saving them from themselves cause I can't and I won't. My job is to try to make it a little more human and so by doing that I'm trying to make it more open for aboriginal kids.

Sometimes my philosophy is "if you're not getting any static, then you're not pushing for change."

I see myself as helping to get as many aboriginal teachers employed here as possible. I want good aboriginal teachers. I want affirmative action to work for the right reasons. You don't hire somebody because they have a brown face, you hire somebody because they're the best person for the job and if all things being equal, you give the brown person an opportunity.

I felt like when I was going to SUNTEP I was trained to go out and be a change agent and a bridge builder. Being a professional is not having nice clothes; being a professional is showing up and doing what you're supposed to do and doing the job the best you can and so it becomes a state of mind.

Carl gives another viewpoint with respect to his relationship with students and dealing with the realities of the day to day aspects of the school:

There's no such thing as professional distance in my world with the kids. To me if you act in the best interest of the kids and try to be the best you can be, you're acting in the most professional fashion you can.

Respect for elders gives you a solid base and you can learn a lot from University classes but the reality is three quarters of it you can throw out the window when you get in the trenches because you're in a survival mode here and your enemies are economics and alcoholism. That kind of training is not there for us. They need to have some methodology classes at the university level to teach us how can we deal with these realities.

Ann explained what she believed are the main criteria to effectively administer a school:

The decisions that you make have to be clear and they have to be effective. I found myself to have strength in doing that. I'd always been a good listener and it sure makes a difference when the parents come in. At the same time you have to always remember not to take anything personally. Keep yourself focused; know what it is that you want and what you're going to do.

For the principalship I was approached in a manner that I was given a chance to try it out. I think they were looking for something to strengthen ties between the school and the reserve. I'm a much better person for being at that school. I think it's because of my struggle to prove who I was and to be accepted. I had to work harder than everybody else.

Eve came to terms with what she described as a duality of being Aboriginal and a teacher:

I think you are truly gifted person to be able to work with children. I think that's it's a gift to be a teacher. I don't only spend my time teaching kids I spend a lot of time learning. Children are really important to me but as a native teacher I don't feel different anymore. I don't feel like a native teacher anymore. I just feel like a teacher.

Sometimes its important for a child just to learn from me just because I'm who I am. I think every school should have at least two or three native teachers on staff. I think

native teachers are gifted. They have special qualities that they can bring into communities

I used to have a standoffish attitude towards the teachers. I used to figure that everybody didn't like me because I was native. I worked so hard to prove that I'm just as good as everybody else it has changed my attitude towards the staff and the principal. I've learned to take initiative and go and say my piece if there's something wrong.

Well as the years go by I find that I'm a really capable teacher and that my love for children shows in a lot of ways. So I guess this school has really developed my teaching and my attitudes towards teaching and my attitudes towards whole system. Although the strength is in learning to stand up for me and to take some initiative. Don't just stand back and look and watch the world go by.

Dolores illustrated how she grapples with balancing the demands of the school community and her own comfort level in terms of the way in which she includes culture in her teaching :

I had a few nonnative families asking me "when are you having a feast," To me that's something that I'm not in any position to be doing. I've made the superintendents aware of that and I've expressed my opinions or my feelings that those are things that you just don't do for show, you do them for a purpose.

So I approached the Cree program as a language program not a cultural program. I approach it the way we took a Cree class at the university;' it was language and that's it.

Dolores feels that it is limiting to only place Aboriginal teachers in community schools:

There's a lot of native children where my children go and you don't see one native person on staff and I really have a problem with that. Students in the core areas probably need more of a role model but what about the other children, the other native students attending all other schools.

The only qualms I had about SIFC was, it seemed like we were being placed just in community schools.

The teachers in this study have defined themselves as Aboriginal teachers in the way they have faced and managed, with determination, the challenges put before them as a minority culture in provincial schools. They have demonstrated their ability to cross cultural borders and

become initiators, change agents, and bridge builders. In many ways they have transformed and influenced the continuum of education in Saskatchewan.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The stories teachers tell figure prominently in the understanding of what teachers and teaching is all about. In this study we treated the teachers' stories as sources of understanding and as a means of securing a true comprehension of the way things are. The teachers in this study shared their stories in an open and honest manner. They reflected on their experiences, the ongoing imbalances, dilemmas, joys, and successes. We came to know these teachers and appreciate their changing environments.

The purpose or main theme of this research was to explore the experiences and attitudes of Aboriginal teachers who work in Provincial schools. The sub-themes that emerged from the main theme were : 1) Factors that Led to Teacher Training and Support at University, 2) Challenges, 3) Positive Experiences, 4) Parents and Community, 5) Staff Dynamics, 6) Impact on Students, and 7) How Participants Viewed Themselves as Aboriginal Teachers.

There were several factors that led these teachers to a career in teaching. Most of them made the decision to enter University because they wanted "something better" but few really believed they would be able to overcome the barriers they knew existed. They had significant influence and support from their families. They related how their experiences affected their cultural identity. Once the initial barriers were overcome and the decision was made to enter

teacher education, the support systems that existed for Aboriginal university students within the context of Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) enabled these participants to not only envision their own education but also to envision themselves as the bridge to Aboriginal Education in general.

Aboriginal teachers have and continue to encounter conflicting and frictional challenges as they progress through their careers in provincial schools. The teachers in this study shared a number of experiences that brought these challenges and frustrations to life. These experiences carried overtones of racism, stereotyping, prejudices, and general misunderstanding of different cultures. The most prevalent bearers of these attitudes were the adults these teachers dealt with in the school and the community. Regardless of the dissension, these teachers have overcome the struggles. Their persistence has influenced and been pivotal to the changing atmosphere in Saskatchewan schools.

Through their persistence, it is clear that Aboriginal teachers have been able to experience gratifying opportunities in Provincial schools. They have been successful role models for both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students and parents. They cooperate and partner with parents to provide for individual differences. They have been instrumental in the increased involvement of Aboriginal students in extra curricular activities and watched their attendance improve. They are honored and rewarded for the cross cultural awareness and experiences they bring to their schools.

At the same time the increasing number of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools has brought diverse reaction from parents and community. Teachers have encountered overt and

covert racism, stereotyping, and prejudice attitudes. They have lived through questionable hiring practices. When they moved into new positions they described their first year "like living in a fish bowl." Other teachers related the positive impact they had on parents and community. They saw an increase in the number of Aboriginal parents who came to the school for interviews and how other parents came to talk to them even if they weren't teaching their children.

The teachers we interviewed were on staff in suburban elementary and high schools, rural and community schools. In some cases these teachers were and still are the only Aboriginal teachers in the school. When they began their careers many teachers were treated more like teacher aides than qualified classroom teachers and were closely monitored by in-school administrators. Their qualifications and abilities were often questioned. Staff members expected Aboriginal teachers to be cultural experts and anticipated that they knew how to respond to all the learning and behavioral concerns of Aboriginal students. All teachers felt that once they "proved themselves" on their staffs, the impact and contributions they were able to make was critical to moving their school divisions forward.

The most positive response we received from teachers was the meaningful, constructive impact they believe they have had on students. These teachers were cognizant that the relationships they established with students were prerequisite to a positive learning and teaching environment. All teachers felt they "really made a difference" to all students, but particularly to the Aboriginal students in their schools. They talked about how they set high standards, earned respect, dealt with racism issues. acted as role models, and built self esteem. In the end they claimed it was hard to explain that impact; it wasn't something they could see on a piece of paper. they could only see it in the students' faces.

Many of the stories the teachers told helped us understand how they viewed themselves as Aboriginal teachers. The many challenges, frustrations, and opportunities they have encountered has helped them continue to define themselves. They have demonstrated self determination for themselves, their students, and their communities. They have established a stable and focused approach to education. They have crossed cultural borders to become initiators, change agents, and bridge builders in Saskatchewan schools.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research we make the following recommendations:

1) A strong common thread that ran throughout the data we collected was the exemplary support and training that Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs provided. Particular note was made of considerations given to the students immediate families and of the strong significance of extended family influence. It is recommended that the commitment to Teacher Education Programs for Aboriginal peoples is continued and strengthened. Teacher Education Programs are encouraged to use Aboriginal teachers with experience in Provincial schools as mentors for university students to support, encourage, and facilitate their initiation into Provincial schools.

2) Aboriginal teachers will continue to face the challenges of racism, prejudice, and stereotyping in provincial schools. These misunderstandings manifest themselves through parents, community members, and to a lesser degree students. It is recommended that teachers who are leaders in the Aboriginal education community take a pro-active approach to the challenges that continue to oppress Aboriginal people. As Jim stated: *That's what happens to a person if they're going to be bent on racism and*

prejudice; it'll kill you that stuff. You'll be a victim all your life. It is further recommended that these teachers continue to take the opportunity to act as role models, bridge builders, and change agents and to work with non-aboriginal staff members to move them through the levels of cultural awareness that will in the end actualize the most constructive way to honor diversity in Saskatchewan schools.

3) Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools have positive experiences when they feel they are contributing to the school community and when they initiate ideas and take leadership roles. They are empowered when they are the originators of change and act as bridge builders in the school and the community. It is recommended that Saskatchewan Education and the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation work together with Aboriginal teachers to form networks that support and encourage them to celebrate their successes.

4) The impact that parents and the larger school community have on Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools is significant. Experiences these teachers have had with parents and community have varied. Some have been supportive; others have been based on distrust and suspicion. It is recommended that teachers remain sensitive to the historic and current realities, the culture identity, and levels of ethnicity of their school communities. Aboriginal teachers need to believe they can and do have an positive impact on parents and community. It is recommended that Saskatchewan Education work with the partners in education to highlight the exemplary models of parent, teacher, and community relationships.

5) Initially staff dynamics were influenced by the lack of Aboriginal teachers in provincial schools and the introduction of affirmative action programs. Over time a mutual respect

has developed in most schools. It is recommended that teachers explore ways to form cultures of collaboration within their schools staffs. Cultures of collaboration are constitutive of, and central to a teacher's daily work. They cultivate a collegial relationship built on trust, support, openness, and routine help. They promote the idea of recognition, sharing , and discussion of ideas and resources. This culture of collaboration is extended to students and community. All teachers need to learn about, practice, and implement the concept of collaborative cultures in their schools.

6) The impact that Aboriginal teachers have had on students is difficult to measure. However the teachers in this study talked about the considerable effect they know they personally have had on students. It is recommended that teachers continue to build and maintain trust relationships with students by listening to, and hearing what they say, and by watching their body language as a means of communication. Students need to know that teachers will keep their concerns confidential and that their teacher's commitment is to them. Teacher in-service that provides opportunities for Aboriginal teachers to help each other explore successful options and celebrate successes around student-teacher relationships is recommended.

7) How participants viewed themselves as Aboriginal teachers was an integral part of this study. Aboriginal teachers are role models for students, parents and the larger community. They make a positive impact on the participation of students and parents in all aspects of the school environment. As Eve claimed: *Sometimes its important for a child just to learn from me just because I'm who I am.* It is recommended that Aboriginal teachers are provided opportunities to share their unique qualities so that this uniqueness

is honored, valued, and respected across the educational spectrum of education in Saskatchewan and that the partners in education provide a forum for Aboriginal teacher to share their talents, accomplishments, and expertise.

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